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Hope Houston interviews Beverley Brenna

Beverley Brenna, mentor for the MFA in Writing and prolific author of children's literature (Photo courtesy of David Stobbe/StobbePhoto.ca)

Beverley Brenna has previously published over a dozen titles for young people, including her "Wild Orchid" series that placed on the 2015 Governor General's shortlist for children's literature, won a Dolly Gray award, and earned a Printz Honor. She has two new titles coming out this spring with Red Deer Press—one creative non-fiction picture book called *The Girl with the Cat* and one middle-grade novel dealing with grief and loss called *Because of That Crow*. For more information, visit Beverley's website.

Hope Houston: You've said that you began your writing journey as a poet and later transitioned to writing for children and younger readerships. What inspired this transition?

Beverley Brenna: I had been writing poetry since I was seven, and I enjoyed the process of creation. Finding an audience for my early poetry wasn't easy, however, so when I was a child, and into my teens, writing for myself was my primary purpose. As I grew older, I published a few single poems for adults and received some audience opportunities through radio broadcasting, but the publications weren't constant. As part of my B.Ed. program, I took a children's literature class where I read some brilliant literary work for young people, and I began to wonder if perhaps I might try my hand in that direction. The books I admired most were presented for middle-years or young-adult age groups, and they inspired me to move towards this kind of narrative writing as a potential target.

HH: There is sometimes an assumption that writing for children is easy or at least *easier* than writing for adults. What is your response to this? Do you find parallels between writing for either readerships? Does either offer unique challenges?

BB: I suggest that writing for any audience involves a similar process and a similar kind of workmanship—with equal expectations for quality. Bad writing for children is easier than good writing… but then, bad writing for any age group is probably similarly breezy. One of the particular challenges in writing for younger readers is that we need to occupy a kind of split perspective: adult writers rendering children *and* the experience of childhood—we are not just looking back; we're avoiding any kind of long-distance, sentimental, or didactic lens, and actually going into the authentic landscape of childhood through our characters.

HH: You are currently auditing Sheri Benning's class on creative nonfiction, and you are in the midst of exploring an interesting history on a particular candy. Would you mind telling us more about that project?

BB: I'm so grateful to be experiencing this class! Writers learn so much from every course, workshop, presentation, and conversation we have about writing, as well as from additional reading and extended writing practice in any form and genres. My draft picture book emerging from this class is currently called *A Chocolate Love Letter: The Story of the New Cuban Lunch Chocolate Bar*. When I drafted it for one of Sheri's assignments, I'd been editing a creative non-fiction picture book by Kathy Stinson called *The Girl Who Loved Giraffes*, about the world's first giraffologist (Fitzhenry & Whiteside, 2020). As part of editing Stinson's work, I began thinking about how interesting these sorts of biographies can be, and wondering why we don't have more child-friendly biographies of prairie people. My husband brought home some of the "revived" Cuban Lunch bars, and I began wondering about who'd bought the trademark… and then realizing that this could be an interesting project for someone. And then I thought that perhaps that someone could be me! So, I cold-called a phone number I found on a website and was suddenly on the line with Crystal Westergaard!

She was very receptive to my questions and the idea of the picture book. And the story has evolved from there!

Here's a quick synopsis: This is the true story of the Cuban Lunch chocolate bar and the contemporary Canadian entrepreneur who now owns the trademark. Becoming a chocolatier isn't easy, but Crystal Westergaard thinks there's no problem that can't be solved. She's faced almost insurmountable challenges with prairie strength, and she's now delighted to be inspiring Western Canada with millions of chocolate bars and the memories that accompany them. Reminiscent of other narrative non-fiction picture books such as Kathy Stinson's two picture books based on the life of Joshua Bell, Helaine Becker's *Lines, Bars and Circles: How William Playfair Invented Graphs* (Kids Can Press) and Andrew Larsen's *The Man Who Loved Libraries: The Story of Andrew Carnegie* (Owlkids Books), this 32-page picture book manuscript highlights Canadian history through a story contextualized in our food industry.

HH: You've mentioned you are interviewing individuals for this project. Sharing a story and working collaboratively to get that story can require a unique negotiation not always present in other genres. Can you describe your experience with this?

BB: I think it's true that any writing based in reality involves some sort of negotiation with "the truth" in order to make a story reader-worthy. This results in the importance of research for telling any story not fully our own, and, even when delineating the context for rendering our own experiences, good research is key.

Research for biography involving real people adds another dimension when these people are available for conversations that heighten our understanding (where subjects say, for example, "That's not the way it really happened") alongside activating our critical consciousness of what makes a good story ("Too much detail will slow us down or bury the theme"). It seems to me that when I write fiction, I'm often writing my way in to a situation or scene—adding events and character traits in order to create a desired effect. It seems to me that when I write non-fiction, I'm actually doing the opposite—writing my way out of a cacophony of possibilities, carving away from a compilation of accumulated facts in order to see the actual story emerge.

HH: You've worked as a mentor and/or a supervisor on a variety of creative theses with the University of Saskatchewan's MFA in Writing program. What has your experience been with the program? Has mentoring/supervising impacted your own writing?

BB: I'm delighted with the opportunities offered to graduate students through the MFA program and admire the way it assists developing writers through a wide-angle on a variety of genres, and then a close-up regarding a thesis choice.

I think that any kind of teaching expands creative possibilities through preparation and delivery. As graduate students in the MFA program bump up against challenges and related questions about craft, my own investigative work is catalysed to seek answers. As I suggest some of those ideas to students, I am constantly calibrating this learning with my own writing—how might a particular practice work for me? In a way, my writing is in the petri dish alongside my student's—and I think both should see a reaction over the course of a mentorship or supervision.

HH: What does your typical writing routine look like? Do you have a particular writing space?

BB: When I'm involved in a new book-length project, I tend to spend a lot of time on it initially, until a complete first draft is done. This might mean four months of three- to four-hour daily entries for a children's novel, during a term in which I'm not teaching. Once I have a finished draft, I'm able to step back, take it up in parts, and revise my way through on a less-obsessive schedule. Probably because I don't have a great memory for details, I need to work fast at first, much like doing watercolour when the advice to a painter might be, "Plan like a tortoise, paint like a hare." Except in my case, I'm essentially painting like a hare first, and then doing the planning (What's the plot? What's the theme?) and doing a lot of the heavy lifting in that regard through revision. I don't generally plan the components of longer works in any great detail ahead of time—I need to write my way in, and I do that by becoming engaged in a key character and writing from their perspective.

I've been working lately on middle-grade novels, and my typical output on a new manuscript is five to eight good pages a day, conceptualized as short, individual chapters in a book where the end product could involve twenty-five to thirty-five chapters. Before I leave my desk, I write the first paragraph of the next chapter, so that it can sit in my subconscious until tomorrow and brew a little bit before I actually get to writing it.

HH: What other practices (artistic, culinary, athletic) feed your writing practice?

BB: Introductory painting classes have helped me begin to conceptualize the creative process through the lens of a different art form. They've also heightened my visual memory—although this is still one of my weakest skills. I don't generally "see" any images when I read, and when I write, I need to locate the action on landscapes/in houses that I know well, because if it's an invented setting, I won't remember it by the next chapter. Walking, biking, Zumba classes are fabulous for clearing the mind but also for nourishing epiphanies. I can enter a Zumba class with a literary challenge in mind, and then—presto—a solution comes to me (sometimes in mid-air).

HH: What consideration are important when writing children's literature?

BB: I think that stories really can change the world. It's important to me that children's authors take this seriously, and think about how books can become windows and mirrors where children see themselves and others… otherwise, why read? It's also important to me that writers take seriously the challenge to "get it right." This means, "Do the research." This also means recognizing our individual limitations, as in, "Am I the best one to be telling this story?" And, finally, it means conducting some market research. "What's out there? Am I re-inventing the wheel?"

My research into children's literature shows some serious gaps in the kinds of offerings available, and I hope that the promise of what Eliza Dresang calls Radical Change in children's literature evolves into even better opportunities in years to come for enriching children's connections to self, the world, and other texts, through deep responses to great, dynamic characters and current, captivating themes.

I encourage anyone interested in writing picture books (or books for children in any other form) to go and read some—read a lot! And, in particular, read contemporary ones. There's a cart of 135 picture books, all published in Canada in 2017, sitting just inside the Education Library, purchased, thanks to a SSHRC Insight Grant, as part of one of my ongoing research studies. Feel free to come by and enjoy! But as you read, make sure you're "reading them like a writer!" Think about how the author and illustrator are achieving the effects they achieve!

HH: Writing can be a solitary practice. In what ways do you foster community in your own writing projects or process?

BB: As a University of Saskatchewan faculty member, I'm part of the U of S Speakers' Bureau, and this assists me in doing school visits where I can share aspects of my work and see children's responses. My husband is also a writer, and I share much of my work with him for his feedback (always incredibly wise). I've been fortunate in doing a couple of Canadian book tours, sponsored by the Canadian Children's Book Centre and the TD Bank, and in this way try to keep in touch with the sensibilities of my intended audiences. Every time I meet a new audience, I think to myself, "Oh! So that's what they're like!" and it totally changes the content of what I'm working on.

HH: What element of craft do you feel most challenged by in your work?

BB: Plot. If someone installed me into an office where the only way out was to create a feasible plot chart, in advance of any preliminary writing or character study, I would be lost forever.

HH: Which of your works to date has been the most challenging to write? Why?

BB: All of the rejected manuscripts that aren't yet published. They sit in a big, green plastic bin and taunt me with memories of the number of hours I've spent on them. But I'm not finished with them! Not yet!

Interview by **Hope Houston**, co-editor of the RVRB and American transplant to the Canadian prairie. Hope writes short literary fiction, as well as speculative fiction for middle grade and young adult readers. You can find Hope on Twitter.